



Employee Spotlight: Darrin Visarraga

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Dance the salsa, make it your own

In April 2002, Darrin Visarraga came to Los Alamos to work with the Infrastructure Systems and Modeling group (now known as A-1, Information Systems and Modeling) on developing computer simulations for physical infrastructures.

“Soon after moving to Los Alamos,” Darrin recalls, “I found myself working all the time, and in dire need of an outlet.”

It was during this time that Darrin started learning about salsa after venturing into a set of free dance lessons offered by two lab employees, Federico Bassetti and Guido Bender. Approximately six months later, Darrin discovered an inner passion for salsa dancing.

For more than a decade, Darrin has been studying and teaching salsa in Los Alamos and around the northern New Mexico area. “To gain confidence as a dancer, you have to let go of your inhibitions and let your movements connect organically,” notes Darrin. “It’s a philosophy that can be applied to anything in life—learn the dance structure, then make it your own.”

The origin of salsa

Salsa (Spanish for “sauce”) originated in New York City in the mid-1970s. The dance evolved in various Latino communities that combined movements from earlier dance forms, such as the Cha-cha-cha, Mambo, Son Montuno, and Bomba. An early proponent of this dance was the Dominican musician Johnny Pacheco, who helped create music designed to accompany salsa. The dance has since undergone much evolution, with communities throughout the world adapting salsa to fit their own customs and tastes.

Darrin was influenced by the Los Angeles salsa movement, which encourages dancers to step on the first beat and follow a straight line, like ballroom or swing dances. This style is different from the jazz-influenced approach used in New York, in which dancers step on the second beat.

“The music continues to evolve to this day,” says Darrin. “Timba is a style of Cuban music that is gaining a lot of popularity these days. Some would describe this style as salsa on steroids. Because of the intensity in its rhythms, it just makes you want to get up and move.”

Montoya and Darrin Visarraga perform with PANdemonium in Aliento: Carnaval 2017.

Dancing the dance

Over the years, Darrin has performed salsa at various venues. For the past six years, he has performed with the Odara Dance Ensemble and PANdemonium, during their annual Carnaval performances at the National Hispanic Cultural Center in Albuquerque. He also participated in Dancing with the Santa Fe Stars in 2016.

“For me, when I am on the dance floor, it’s all about fun,” says Darrin, “even when you miss a move or are out of rhythm, just smile and have fun. When it comes to enjoying salsa, you must be at ease with making mistakes.”

Teaching

salsa is more than just practice makes perfect. For Darrin, salsa is about freedom of expression and moving to the rhythm.

On becoming a teacher

In 2006, the students who taught Darrin salsa were gone. Darrin decided to fill their shoes by teaching salsa himself.

“I felt really bad for the students in my first few rounds of classes,” he notes with a laugh. “At the beginning, I wanted to model everything I was doing based on how I was taught. Not that this was a bad thing—I never truly felt comfortable as an instructor. It wasn’t until I started becoming comfortable with my own movement that my confidence began to build. That’s what I am hoping my students take away from my lessons: for them to open up and embrace dance movement as a result of their own self-expression.”

In Los Alamos, Darrin teaches salsa on Wednesday nights (7 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.) at the Los Alamos Senior Center (classes are held at the UnQuarked Wine Room on the first Wednesday of every month). Classes are free of charge.

Darrin Visarraga is a scientist/mathematician in the Information Systems and Modeling group (A-1).

Resources

- [Darrin’s Facebook Page](#)
- [UnQuarked Salsa Night](#)
- [Northern New Mexico Salsa](#)

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